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*Witches and witchcraft are enjoying a new vogue in the profession. The author organized a colloquium on the subject for his history majors, from which the following article resulted.*

# Abracadabra — Sorcery And Witchcraft In European History

BY W. R. JONES

**T**he current enthusiasm for the history of sorcery and witchcraft probably dates from the publication of Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper's *Encounter* articles, which eventually became the long essay, "The European Witch-craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries."<sup>1</sup> Although Trevor-Roper helped reestablish the scholarly fashionability of the subject, his approach to it and his conclusions had little new to offer and do not suggest the new directions taken by the latest scholarship. Like the nineteenth-century rationalist historians and their disciples, Soldan, Hansen, and Lea,

who viewed witchcraft as a delusion imposed by a bigoted church on an ignorant and superstitious peasantry, Trevor-Roper was mainly interested in the history of persecution—the rise and fall of public awareness of witchcraft, the scepticism or credulity of officialdom and intellectuals, and the relationship of persecution to the institutional and cultural environment.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, something of a methodological revolution in the study of witchcraft has suggested several new questions to be asked of the evidence and has challenged the conventional answers of older historians. A new breed of historians of the occult, armed with the assumptions of the functionalist school of modern social anthropology, are examining the European

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witch-craze as an aspect of inter-community relations and as a guarantee for the maintenance of traditional social values. They point out that earlier historians had been more concerned with formal opinions about witchcraft than with the thing itself and had allowed their scepticism to blind them to the social and psychological implications of popular belief in witches. The latest scholars, who acknowledge their indebtedness to the anthropological theories developed by field-investigators in Africa since E. E. Evans-Pritchard's pioneering study of the Azande, argue the need to study witchcraft as it actually existed rather than in terms of the speculations and suppositions of the defenders and critics of persecution.<sup>3</sup> The renewal of scholarly interest in the history of witchcraft has already produced sufficient new interpretation to warrant an effort to evaluate its findings and to reconsider the relevancy of the subject to the general history of Western civilization.

### 1. The History of an Illusion

The historical prototype of the "witch" of early modern Europe was the ancient and medieval "sorcerer." The rather arbitrary distinction enforced by the English terms, "sorcerer" and "witch," and the German, "*Zauber*" and "*Hexe*," does not exist for French scholars, for whom the single word, "*sorcier*," suffices or for the medieval Latinist, who encompassed both

under the term, "*maleficus*." During the Middle Ages various kinds of village magicians—the diviner, the image-magician, the maker and seller of love-potions and charms—actually existed. They practiced their crafts for benevolent and malevolent ends—the difference between "white magic" and "black." Their powers were credited by their neighbors, who purchased them in the belief that they commanded demonic assistance.<sup>4</sup> Since the medieval sorcerer frequently armed himself with various kinds of organic poison, his victims may have experienced physical as well as psychological effects from his ministrations. Both the sorcerer and the later witch were accused of specific malicious or destructive acts—harming people or their property, rendering men and beasts infertile, and causing a variety of atmospheric disturbances.

The image of the witch flourishing during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a pastiche created by the grouping of elements of later medieval folklore and the fantasies of theologians and inquisitors around this figure of the sorcerer. Professor Trevor-Roper, following the suggestions of Hansen and Lea, has shown how the self-fulfilling speculations of canonists and scholastics, reinforced by torture or the threat of it, combined with pre-Christian or non-Christian folk-mythology to produce the full-fledged demonology of the later Middle Ages.



*Night-flying witches*



*Desecrating Christian symbols*



*Baptism by Satan*



*Satan disrobes the witches*



*The Obscene Kiss*



*Dancing at the Sabbath*

## THE WITCHES' SABBATH

Heightened public awareness of the existence of witches was the result of the expansion of the definition of heresy to encompass "heretical sorcery" and the invention of agencies of investigation and repression. This is the "police-blotter" explanation of the European witch-craze, which argues that the "contagion" or "epidemic" affected victims and judges rather than the accused.

The romanticization of the sorcerer (or, more often, the sorceress) into the witch of the early modern era had been fairly well completed by the fifteenth century, which produced two classic descriptions of this new kind of religious deviancy in Pope Innocent VIII's bull, warning Christendom of the existence of a witch-cult, and the notorious manual, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, of those industrious Dominicans, Kramer and Sprenger. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the image of the witch, at least as it flourished on the continent, had absorbed the mythical elements of the Satanic pact, night-flying, the Sabbat, the Black Mass, and the penchant for spectacular orgies typical of the familiar witch. Noticeable regional differences continued to exist, however, as witnessed by the relative artlessness and pragmatism of the English witches.

## 2. The Historiography of Witchcraft

The history of occultism has often been victimized by its admir-

ers. Much of the literature of witchcraft is absolutely useless to the modern researcher; and, regrettably, even university libraries seem to have an overabundance of this type of secondary material. For instance, the unwary student can easily be overwhelmed by the seductive but erroneous theories of Montague Summers, a pretended Roman Catholic priest and a devoted student of witch-lore, who never allowed his considerable acquaintance with the sources to shake his faith in the existence of a witchcult.<sup>5</sup> Summers, who believed that witches in all ages and places were actually practicing Satanists, occupies a position in the scholarship of witchcraft stretching back to the nineteenth-century French *magus*, Eliphas Lévi, and his English translator, Arthur Edward Waite, and forward to such cult-scholars as Gerald Gardner and the sinister Aleister Crowley.<sup>6</sup>

Equally insidious for the beginning student is the astonishing and indefensible theory of Miss Margaret Murray, the London University anthropologist, who advocated in three widely read and easily dismissed books the notion that witchcraft derived from a paleolithic fertility religion.<sup>7</sup> According to Miss Murray, this ancient faith had survived the Christianization of the West. Its true character was misunderstood by the medieval church, which persecuted its adherents as devil-worshippers. Although she portrayed witchcraft as

an archaic subterranean religion, to which the common people of the Middle Ages gave their allegiance, she also argued (not very consistently) that every English king until the seventeenth century was put to death as a ritual sacrifice to the ancient deities. It would probably be unkind to torment this dead horse further, except that it continues to show signs of life. Miss Murray's views gained a respectability they hardly deserved by their inclusion in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* discussion of witchcraft; and more recently they have been resuscitated by several semi-popular and even scholarly books.<sup>8</sup> The fundamental problem with the approaches to the study of witchcraft represented by the works of Summers and Murray is that they telescope the history of the subject, blurring the stages of the historical evolution of occult traditions and ignoring the conditioning effects of time and geography on the mythology of witchcraft.

The virtue of the new interdisciplinary approach to the history of witchcraft derives from its ability to view the phenomenon within the total social, institutional, and moral context of European life and to discern the conscious and, possibly, the unconscious motives of victims, judges, and accused. Several new works such as Lucy Maier's *Witchcraft*, Max Marwick's edition of readings on *Witchcraft and Sorcery* for the Penguin Modern Sociology Series, and Geoffrey

Parrinder's excellent little book, *Witchcraft: European and African*, illustrate the value of applying the methods and assumptions of social anthropology to the European data.<sup>9</sup>

In 1970 the British Association of Social Anthropologists memorialized the contribution of E. E. Evans-Pritchard to the study of witchcraft by publishing a series of papers delivered to their annual meeting and edited by Mary Douglas as *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*. For the historian, the essays by Peter Brown on accusations of certain groups in later Roman society and of Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane on witchcraft in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England are illuminating from the methodological point of view.<sup>10</sup> Earlier efforts by scholars like Kittredge, Davies, Ewen, and Notestein to study witchcraft as it actually existed or as it was reflected in the surviving records of the civil and ecclesiastical courts were too ambitious or broad and seldom probed beyond the facile generalizations concerning the motives of persecutors, the reasons for belief, and the effects of social, intellectual, and economic conditioning set forth by authorities like Hansen and Lea, who relied almost wholly on the theoretical literature.<sup>11</sup>

The most important contribution to the new scholarship is undoubtedly Alan Macfarlane's revised doctoral dissertation, *Witchcraft in*



*Tudor and Stuart England*, which limited its attention to the single county of Essex during the period 1560 to 1680, and which applied a microscope to a large number of recorded accusations and prosecutions. Macfarlane's findings have demolished or seriously undermined many of the old generalizations concerning the European witch-craze, at least as it manifested itself in one English county. For instance, he discovered that there was little correlation between periods of intense persecution and the existence of religious controversy, the activities of fanatic "witch-finders" like Matthew Hopkins, or changing social and economic conditions. Macfarlane viewed witchcraft accusations and confessions as vehicles for the expression of personal and communal aggression, generated by feelings of shame and hurt, themselves arising from the victims' belief that they had been the target of witchcraft in retaliation for their own antisocial conduct. Macfarlane noted:

Witchcraft prosecutions were usually between people who knew each other intimately—that is, between village neighbors. They almost always arose from quarrels over gifts and loans in which the victim refused the witch some small gift, heard her muttering under her breath or threatening him, and subsequently suffered some misfortune. It was usually the person who had done the first wrong under the old ideals of charity who felt himself bewitched.<sup>12</sup>

Macfarlane interpreted such prosecutions, which were themselves a stage in the counter-defense

against black magic, "as a means of effecting a deep social change; from a 'neighbourly,' highly integrated and mutually interdependent village society, to a more individualistic one." The effect of witchcraft accusations were, as anthropologists observed, to "maintain and reinforce social relationships," but also, as historians pointed out, to destroy the old social values by attacking those demanding their enforcement. Macfarlane saw the witch trials of Tudor and Stuart England as the product of communal tensions and private feelings of guilt venting themselves in a multiplication of accusations and confessions of a familiar and believable offense.

One thing is very clear—the broad generalizations of the older generation of historians ignored the important regional differences of witchcraft and, based as they were almost wholly on legal and theological discussions, obscured the practical and commonplace role of superstition, which was both "actively" practiced and "passively" accepted within European village communities. The French historian, Robert Mandrou, has shown how an analysis of the specific legal procedures applied on various levels of the French judiciary at the end of the seventeenth century and the "collective mentality" which these procedures mirrored explains the growing scepticism of the major tribunals, as contrasted with the lesser



*In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the witch mania in England and Scotland reached its height. The precise number of victims will never be known but undoubtedly ran into the thousands. For most of the executions "witch-finders" were directly responsible. Many of these were amateurs who had convinced themselves and their neighbors that they were able to recognize witches. More sinister were the professionals who travelled from village to village "discovering" witches through prickings, "swimmings," and other infallible means. Among the more notorious of these witch-finders was Matthew Hopkins, who made a good deal of money practising his profession and in 1647 published his classic *Discovery of Witches*. In the frontispiece to this work (above), Hopkins is shown having triumphantly forced two witches to reveal their "imps" or "familiars," minor demons who performed the witches' work at their bidding.*

**(Opposite)** *A contemporary drawing shows a witch-finder receiving his reward. He bears a striking resemblance to Matthew Hopkins.*



courts, concerning a type of crime which long continued to flourish within rural France.<sup>13</sup> He distinguished between the ordinary folk-magic of village communities and the few great scandals evoked by the alleged diabolical possession of high-born ladies in urban convents and also between the literary and actual manifestations of witchcraft. Mandrou has succeeded to a greater extent than other historians in explaining the specific way in which the new learning of the European Enlightenment infiltrated the courts and dampened persecution.

Another valuable regional study of witchcraft is that by Julio Caro Baroja, whose *World of the Witches* provides an anthropologically-oriented analysis of Basque

witchcraft and also the most useful single-volume history of witchcraft from antiquity to the modern era.<sup>14</sup> Like Mandrou, Caro Baroja was aware of the difference between bookish descriptions of witchcraft and the popular superstitions of remote village communities. He relegated the idea of a "witch-craze" or "contagion" to the imaginations of judges and witnesses; and, more than any other modern historian, he has explored the possible use of hallucinatory drugs like belladonna and aconite by presumed witches. A glance at some of the specialized local studies cited or quoted in E. W. Monter's useful collection of readings on *European Witchcraft* or Erik Midelfort's exhaustive listing of works on witchcraft published in the *Papers of*



A 17TH CENTURY WITCH EXECUTION

*the Bibliographical Society of America* for 1968 indicates the immense complexity and variety of this occult tradition.<sup>15</sup>

Although the trial and punishment of alleged witches ceased toward the end of the seventeenth century throughout most of the civilized Western world, the occult retained its fascination for European man and continued to titillate and inspire him, especially in its literary forms. This literary occultism of Renaissance Neoplatonism, of Shakespearean drama, or of the Faust legend in its various redactions was a very different thing from the folk-religion of medieval villages, although it perpetuated an interest in eccentric forms of supernaturalism through the age of the Enlightenment into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Demonology and Satanism were important sources for themes, plots, and symbols of modern European and American literature—ranging from J. K. Huysmans' *Là-bas*, with its classic description of the Black Mass, to *Rosemary's Baby* and the films of Roman Polanski. Much more research needs to be done to relate this rich tradition of literary occultism to the social, intellectual, and artistic history of modern Europe and America.<sup>17</sup>

The study and teaching of the history of sorcery and witchcraft represents more, however, than the idle curiosity of romantic adolescents or the fantasizing of poets and

novelists. It shows, for instance, the value of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of history which is frequently advocated but seldom practiced. Fascinating results have recently been obtained from the application to the evidence of the Salem Village episode of clinical studies of hysteria (Chadwick Hansen) and of early child-rearing customs (John Demos).<sup>18</sup> Alan Macfarlane has explained the relevancy of functionalist sociology to the interpretation of English witchcraft, wherein he discerned the interplay of communal tensions and human aggression. The analysis of pre-modern folk superstitions—both white and black magic—as suggested by Keith Thomas' and Alan Macfarlane's descriptions of counter-magical practices provides a more sophisticated view of early systems of spirituality and their interconnection with social relationships than could be obtained from the study of formal institutions of church law, government, or doctrine.<sup>19</sup> An understanding of changing official opinions (especially within the judiciaries) during periods of declining persecution gives the intellectual historian a unique opportunity to see the actual interrelationship of ideas and events. In short, the history of witchcraft offers an interesting and hitherto neglected avenue to the study and teaching of several important historical and social phenomena—the interaction of myth and

reality, the social and psychological implications of superstition, the rationalization of aggression or misfortune, and the immense complexity and variety of preindustrial folk society.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Published in *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (New York and Evanston, 1968), pp. 90-192, and separately by Harper & Row as a Torchbook.

<sup>2</sup>W. G. Soldan, *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse* (Stuttgart, 1843) was reedited by H. Heppé (Stuttgart, 1880) and M. Bauer (Munich, 1912); J. Hansen, *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozess im Mittelalter* (Munich, 1900). Lea discussed sorcery and witchcraft in *A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (3 vols.; London and New York, 1888) and *History of the Inquisition of Spain* (4 vols.; New York, 1906-07). See his especially valuable reference work, *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft* (3 vols.; Philadelphia, 1939).

<sup>3</sup>E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1950). Examples of the anthropological literature are excerpted in *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. M. Marwick, Penguin Modern Sociology Readings (Harmondsworth, 1970).

<sup>4</sup>On the "reality" of sorcery, see W. R. Jones, "The Commerce of Sorcery in Later Medieval Europe," *International Review of History and Political Science*, VII (1970), 78-92.

<sup>5</sup>Several of Summers' most popular books are *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York, 1926); *The Geography of Witchcraft* (London, 1927); *The Vampire, his Kith and Kin* (London, 1928); *The Vampire in Europe* (London, 1929); *The Werewolf* (London, 1933).

<sup>6</sup>"Eliphas Lévi" was the pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant, whose best known book, *The History of Magic* (4th ed.; London, 1948), was translated into English by Arthur Edward Waite. For the modern wizard, Crowley, see his *Confessions . . . An Autohagiography* (New York, 1970).

<sup>7</sup>Margaret A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921); *The God of the Witches* (London, 1934); *The Divine King in England* (London, 1954).

<sup>8</sup>Miss Murray's theories are reflected in Pennethorne Hughes, *Witchcraft* (Baltimore, 1965); C. Williams, *Witchcraft* (Cleveland and New York, 1959); T. C. Lethbridge, *Witches* (New York, 1968); Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York, 1969). Although Elliot Rose, *A Razor for a Goat* (Toronto, 1962), criticized the Murrayite theory, he concluded with an explanation of the development of witchcraft which was very close to it.

<sup>9</sup>Several of the latest publications are reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 30, 1970, pp. 1237-39. See L. Mair, *Witchcraft* (London, 1969); G. Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African* (London, 1963); A. D. J. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York and Evanston, 1970).

<sup>10</sup>Peter Brown, "Sorcery, Demons, and the Rise of Christianity from Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages"; Keith Thomas, "The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft," *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. M. Douglas (London, 1970), pp. 17-46; 47-79.

<sup>11</sup>G. L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929); C. L. Ewen, *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (London, 1929) and *Witchcraft and Demonism* (London, 1933); R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch Beliefs* (London, 1947); Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England* (Washington, 1911); G. L. Burr, *Narratives of Witchcraft Cases* (New York, 1966). Barbara Rosen has reprinted some contemporary pamphlets in *Witchcraft* (London, 1969).

<sup>12</sup>Macfarlane, pp. 196-97.

<sup>13</sup>R. Mandrou, *Magistrats et sorciers en France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1968). The semi-popular work of Aldous Huxley, *The Devils of Loudun* (New York, 1948), is interesting but not helpful.

<sup>14</sup>J. Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago, 1964).

<sup>15</sup>*European Witchcraft*, ed. E. W. Monter (New York, 1969), esp. pp. 173-77; H. C. Erik Midelfort, "Recent Witch-Hunting Research," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, LXII (1968), 373-416. Excellent for bibliographical leads (but not much else) is R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopaedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (London, 1959).

<sup>16</sup>See L. Thorndyke, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (8 vols.; New York, 1923-58) for the various occult traditions; also K. M. Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team: An Examination of the Beliefs in Magic among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and His Immediate Successors* (London, 1962); E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge and New York, 1948) and *Ritual Magic* (Cambridge, 1949).

<sup>17</sup>For references to some of the sources of nineteenth-century occultism, see W. R. Jones, "Palladism and the Papacy: an Episode of French Anticlericalism in the Nineteenth Century," *A Journal of Church and State*, XII (1970), 453-73.

<sup>18</sup>In addition to Hansen's *Witchcraft at Salem*, see J. Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," *American Historical Review*, LXXV, 1311-26. An illustration of the psychological approach to the subject is G. Jahoda, *The Psychology of Superstition* (London, 1969).

<sup>19</sup>Mr. Keith Thomas of St. John's College, Oxford, has written an authoritative study of primitive beliefs in preindustrial England in his recently-published *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971).



SWIMMING A WITCH